

Travellers pledge to fight eviction from Basildon camp

MARK HENNESSY, London Editor

Wed, Jul 06, 2011

IRISH TRAVELLERS ordered to leave one of the biggest Traveller camps in Europe have said they will resist eviction by an English local authority next month, following a decision by Basildon Council to go ahead with the clearance.

Hundreds of Travellers, many with connections to Rathkeale, Co Limerick, have lived at the Dale Farm camp outside Basildon in Essex for up to 10 years, but more than 60 families were issued with eviction notices on Monday evening. The land was purchased by a Traveller in 2000, who then sold pitches to others. These were given planning permission, but Basildon Council insists the subsequent development – housing somewhere between 60 and 100 families – in caravans and mobile homes is on green-belt land.

The council, which believes that the eviction could cost nearly £20 million, yesterday said Travellers affected by the eviction notice had been given a 28-day notice to quit, but it would not be enforced until August 28th.

However, one of the Traveller leaders, Pearl McCaffrey, yesterday told The Irish Times: “We are going to stand our ground because we have nowhere else to go. We’ll fight our battles in the best way that we can.”

Up to 200 supporters, she said, have already promised to be present at the site in late August, “while a lot of Travellers have also said that they will help”, she said, adding that they had not completely given up on hopes of a final legal challenge.

“People don’t want confrontation, but everybody here today is really down and completely fed up. Everyone is just feeling terrible, but we are definitely staying put. We’ll decide what we do next at a meeting on Saturday,” she declared.

The policing bill for the eviction could cost £9.5 million.

Richard Sheridan, president of the Gypsy Council, said the Travellers would not leave voluntarily: “You have to ask if it is value for money for taxpayers to pay millions for the police operation and millions more when these people are left homeless.

Urging the Travellers to leave peacefully, Conservative leader of the council Tony Ball said the large police operation was necessary to demonstrate the council’s “ongoing commitment to its green belt policy and the firm line that it takes on enforcing planning legislation”.

“Having negotiated so hard to get the government to recognise the scale and impact of this operation on Basildon and Essex residents it would be unacceptable for the council to fail its residents by not agreeing to make this additional contribution,” he said.

Some locals claim a number of the Dale Farm families have halting sites in Cambridge which they refuse to use, but this has been denied by the Travellers to the Irish Chaplaincy Service, which has monitored the situation for months.

The forcible removal of the Travellers is supported by the majority of Basildon residents, if public opinion can be accurately gauged, amid claims that Traveller children have been mocked in the local secondary school and Travellers denied service in local bars.

Declaring their support for the Travellers on indymedia.com, a group entitled Dale Farm Solidarity said it would begin to establish "Camp Constant" from July 9th for the Traveller campaign and urged others to become involved.

© 2011 The Irish Times